



Teen Substance Use and Abuse  
in the Growing Metro of Des Moines, Iowa  
White Paper presented by  
uVoice, a Community Youth Concepts program  
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## Introduction

uVoice, a youth philanthropy board facilitated by Community Youth Concepts, consists of a group of twelve students who live in the Des Moines metro area. Bimonthly, these students come together to identify issues facing youth in their community and to combat the identified issues through a grant-making process. uVoice members research community needs, develop a grant application, review responses to their request for proposals, and allocate dollars to non-profit organizations they believe are combating the health-oriented issues prioritized by uVoice through the community needs assessment.

In previous years, uVoice has focused on topics relating to mental health, stress, and suicide prevention. This year, uVoice members chose to focus on one of the destructive coping mechanisms that students often utilize as a result of mental health and stress-related issues and addressed the issue of substance abuse among youth in their schools during the 2016-2017 school year.

## Background

uVoice students agreed that substance abuse was present among their peers; however, members sensed their schools had a lack of adequate resources to address the issue. The group felt current resources were often outdated, were not useful, and were not engaging to youth. They knew that the experiences and opinions of their small group were not representative of all youth in Polk County, so, as a group, they expanded their reach through a forty-six-question survey distributed to high school students in their respective school districts. As a result, almost 600 students from five different high schools in Polk County completed the survey. These schools represented a variety of socio-economic groups, ethnic groups, and geographic locations around the Des Moines, Iowa metropolitan area.

## Results of the Survey

Survey questions focused on three main types of substances: alcohol, marijuana, and prescription drugs. The survey also included questions related to illicit drug use and family history of substance abuse. Some of the prominent results of the survey include:

- Alcohol is the most commonly used substance with 62.3% (363) of respondents saying they have tried alcohol and 15% (87) respondents said that they consume alcohol at least once per month.
- Of those surveyed, 32% (188) report a family history of substance abuse, and 63% of those 188 respondents report having a family member who abuses alcohol.
  - Of those students with a family history, 73% report having tried alcohol compared to 62% of the general population. Of those who have a family history of alcohol abuse, 45% report their first drink being before the age of 14 compared to 34% of those without a preexisting family history of alcohol abuse.

- 363 students indicated that they have tried alcohol, and of those respondents, 92.16% (329) said that they are aware of the consequences of long-term alcohol abuse.
- Marijuana is the second most commonly used substance with 33% (194) of respondents saying they have tried marijuana. 7.13% (41) of respondents admitted to using marijuana once or more per week, and 60% (346) indicated that they know peers to use marijuana at least once per week.
- The most common age to begin using both alcohol and marijuana is between the ages of 13-14. The most common age to begin using unauthorized prescription drugs is between the ages of 15-16.
- 60% (325) of respondents do not feel comfortable accessing substance abuse resources for themselves or a friend—and those who do feel comfortable could not articulate where they would access resources. In response to “Where would you access resources,” most students wrote in, “a parent or trusted” adult.

## Discussion

Upon analysis, uVoice identified the following trends. First, the number of individuals who consumed alcohol as a minor before the age of 14 was higher than uVoice members anticipated. This young age bracket shows that substance abuse information should be distributed in early adolescent years, most strategically in middle school. However, uVoice’s statistics based upon individuals with a family history of alcohol abuse demonstrated that although education may raise awareness, it may not be likely to affect change in youth substance abuse behavior. Nearly all respondents who acknowledged they had consumed alcohol stated they were aware of the long-term risks. These results illustrate that educating students on the long-term risks of alcohol, which is the focus of many alcohol prevention programs, is not an adequate prevention strategy. These results also imply that regardless of long-term consequences, a significant portion of youth were willing to turn to substances to cope.

uVoice identified that marijuana was the second most widely used substance among youth, with results indicating that about a third of the youth surveyed had tried it. Youth responded that they most often start using marijuana around the same time respondents reported starting to drink, age 13 to 14. uVoice noted the discrepancy between the percent of students who state they have tried marijuana and the percent (60%) of respondents reported having at least one friend uses marijuana once a week. There could be a variety of reasons for this discrepancy but the group theorized that students could be hesitant to claim that they have tried an illegal substance, but more willing to share information about friends/peers marijuana usage.

Most concerning to uVoice, however, were responses to questions asking students if they would feel comfortable seeking help for themselves or a friend and where they would go to access resources. Of the only 40 percent that were comfortable seeking help for substance abuse issues, many responded that they would seek advice from “a parent or trusted adult.” uVoice members felt that this response was generic and could be considered spoon-fed. Other responses were “hospital/rehab,” “I don’t know,” or “School.” uVoice determined that these responses were not indicative of a concrete plan or knowledge of local resources to help themselves or others struggling with substance abuse.

## **Next Steps**

After analyzing and discussing data collected from their community, uVoice members brainstormed ideas to address areas of concern identified in the survey. Members agreed that schools, as the only institution, that sees all youth on a daily basis, are the first line of defense to bolstering awareness of confidential and accessible substance abuse resources. These resources would preferably serve all youth in Polk County, regardless of socioeconomic status. While the schools would help create awareness, uVoice felt it was unreasonable to expect schools to provide the substance abuse services.

As uVoice crafted its Request for Proposal, the board envisioned funding a non-profit organization with programming emphasizing harm reduction strategies for those students ages 13-16 with a history of substance use. Characteristics of such a program would include youth outreach, awareness and education tactics for parents and/or schools, peer-to-peer mentorship, a safe space encouraging healthy coping skills, or youth-related education about how to address substance abuse-related situations in school or at home.

## **Conclusion**

The uVoice members voted unanimously to split the grant in order to fund two separate organizations, awarding \$500 to ArtForceIowa and \$2,000 to Children and Families of Iowa. ArtForceIowa is a nonprofit organization that teaches at-risk youth creative coping strategies through many different arts-based programs. It provides confidential opportunities for students to express themselves while fostering positive adult to youth relationships in an easily accessible location for students in Des Moines. Children and Families of Iowa received the grant money based on its extensive work in a part of Polk County lacking substance abuse resources. Its program in the Bondurant-Farrar Community School District brings awareness to students, parents, and educators, while creating a safe space for students in the school to learn about how to reach out for help for themselves or others.

However, there is still much to be done in Polk County. While the board knows that organizations like ArtForceIowa and Children and Families of Iowa are positive influences for youth in the area, many students do not know these programs exist or where to find them. The future the uVoice board would like to see is one where teachers, students, and parents understand the signs of substance abuse and know the accessible resources available. Currently 60% of students don't know where to go for help, but with the ongoing collaboration of nonprofits, schools, and youth alike, 100% of students will feel comfortable reaching out to end youth substance abuse.